Wichita

Pentecostal Connectivity

I did a little research in preparation for this occasion. I located a folder in my files from Jun 1994 – the files which my wife constantly reminds me I must clean out, shred, discard: “When in the world are you going to need that?” she asks, a bit smugly. Her files, her closets, her life – are lean, efficient, elegant, compared to mine. “You never know,” I sheepishly respond, “You just never know when you will need something.” Why am I telling you this? The reason is that you have vindicated me and I am grateful. You helped me prove that it is prudent and wise to hold onto a twenty-year-old file. So, thank you very much.

In that file was a little booklet summarizing the actions of the 206th General Assembly of the PCUSA, which was held here, Wichita, Kansas. It is not surprising that we are still talking about and arguing over many of the issues that the 206th G.A. dealt with. It’s what it means to be a Presbyterian Church. We take the world seriously, we take seriously our responsibility to be the Body of Christ in the world and that means always asking about the Gospel implications of whatever is happening in the world. It makes for a lively church sometimes. We’re always discussing and very publicly arguing about justice, race, gender, sexuality, gender orientation, peace, and marriage.

In 1994 we talked about all of that but the issue that loomed over the Assembly was our church’s participation in a conference, Reimaging – God, Community the Church. Some of our people objected strenuously to some of the things that were said at that conference. Others loved what was said and thought it was about time the church did some reimaging. Strong language was used, accusations flew back and forth between liberals and conservatives, men and women, progressive and evangelical. It got pretty hot: churches were threatening to pull out of the denomination and many wondered whether the PCUSA would survive.

Well, not only did we survive but the Assembly nearly unanimously approved a report and series of resolutions about

the issues. It was a remarkable experience – a graceful experience of unity in the midst of diversity. It is a challenge with which we continue to struggle. Twenty years after the 1994 Assembly and Reimaging crisis we are once again arguing about related issues but with a huge difference this time. This time individuals and congregations are deciding to leave, to form new associations, which look like a new denomination, or to leave this family altogether and join a family of more like-minded people. It is appealing. Who wouldn't like to stop contending and arguing and associate with people who agree on matters of biblical interpretation, theology and social witness? I confess, I've thought about it a lot. Maybe we ought to just take all the progressives out of the mainline denomination and form an elegantly unified new progressive church: and take all the conservative evangelicals out of the denomination and form a new church. No more arguing, contending, name-calling, accusing. Why not? Besides the fact that we daughters and sons of John Calvin have a strong sense of human contrariness – known as original sin – that sooner or later infects even new like-minded associations – besides that Reformed realism, we cannot and should not do that because of Pentecost and because of something St Paul said to the early church, says to us still. (If you happen to believe, as I do, that the Word of God is a living Word.)

Fifty days after Passover, after the traumatic arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus, three days later, the experience they could barely comprehend, let alone describe, the little band of friends of Jesus are still in Jerusalem, waiting: seven weeks hiding in the middle of a busy capital city. It would be dangerous to be seen publically and identified as followers of the rabble-rousing rabbi from Nazareth. So they are behind locked doors, not in the Temple saying their Pentecost prayers - as faithful Jews were supposed to do – when things begin to happen literally beyond description. The sound of a mighty wind, tongues of fire. Artists loved to paint the scene with flames on the apostles' heads, like propane jets; El Greco's painting the most famous. I was probably not the only youngster who, when I saw that Pentecost picture in Sunday School, thought that the disciples hair was on fire.

They do the most remarkable thing: they leave that room, their secure safe house for seven weeks. They come out, literally, go public. Then the most remarkable thing of all: they begin to tell the story of Jesus – not in Aramaic, which was the language they all spoke, but in the languages of all the people who had come to Jerusalem from all over the world. The whole world was there, the global community: Parthians, Medes, Cappadocians, Asians, Egyptians, Libyans, Romans, Arabs. This new thing that happened on Pentecost created interpersonal and international connectivity, communication.

The whole thing makes us a little nervous. The Spirit of God stirring up all that fire and energy is a kind of antithesis to our Presbyterian way of doing everything decently and in order. Pentecost is not orderly.

A woman walked into a stately, traditional formal Presbyterian Church, walked down the center aisle and took a seat in the front pew – which, being a Presbyterian Church, was empty. When the Presbyterian preacher began her sermon and arrived at her first point, the woman said out loud, “Amen, Amen, That’s it! Amen.” Necks were craned to see where the disturbance was coming from. When the preacher reached her second point the woman said, much louder this time, “Oh preach it, sister, preach it.” Now the congregation was becoming noticeably uncomfortable. When the preacher reached her third point, the woman stood up in the front pew, raised her arms and shouted “Praise Jesus! Hallelujah! Praise Jesus!” Finally an usher approached. “Ma’am, is there anything wrong?” “Why no,” the woman responded, “I just have the Spirit.” “Well,” the usher sniffed, “you certainly didn’t get it here.”

The miracle of Pentecost, the miracle of the Spirit is not, as commonly understood, incoherent babbling, speaking in tongues; it is quite the opposite: people speaking and hearing: the miracle of communication. We believe in a God who brings people together, a God who mends brokenness and transforms separateness and divisiveness into oneness and wholeness and peace.

The author of the account, Luke, wants us to know that at Pentecost the whole world was there with its marvelous diversity: racial, cultural, linguistic, theological, moral, political. Luke wants us to know that on Pentecost the Gospel went global but also radically local, speaking to people where they were, in their own languages, with their own cultural identities. Luke wants us to know communication is a gift of God: that within the church, listening and hearing and respecting one another is a gift of God and a moral imperative.

I've been an ordained Presbyterian minister for 51 years this month. And sometimes I want to weep at what has happened – is happening – to my church. We are half the size we were the year I was ordained. And now, more congregations are planning to pack up and leave. It's heartbreaking and disgraceful. Harvard's Robert Putnam and David Campbell, a sociologist from Notre Dame, wrote a fine book, American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us. It is based on a large public opinion survey and one of the revelations ought to stop us in our tracks. People are losing interest in religion in general and staying away from churches because all they hear about is the arguing and fighting, the anti-this and anti-that, the meanness, the judgmentalism about sexual orientation. The fact is that what the world sees of us is not very attractive. Isn't it simply amazing and instructive that the most compelling thing, most influential thing, a religious leader has said in a very long time was Pope Francis, when asked about same gender relationships, said simply, "Who am I to judge?"

When I worry about my church I like to remember and read what St. Paul said to the 1st century Christians at Corinth: "Now I appeal to you brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no division among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose." People in that little Christian Community in the bustling Greek seaport city of Corinth were arguing about almost everything: about some drinking too much communion wine, eating more than their share of the communal potluck meal they observed every week, about hairstyles and head dress and, of course, about doctrine. They were choosing up sides. Some

were in Paul's camp. Some preferred Peter. Others followed yet another teacher. There were liberals and conservatives, progressives and evangelicals, fundamentalists and non-literalists. They were making a spectacle of themselves. They were defaming the gospel and in the first paragraph of his letter to them, St. Paul says, "For God's sake, stop. For Christ's literal sake, stop."

I am haunted by some of the last words Jesus spoke to his disciples. It was at the table of the last meal they would share, their Last Supper. He said, "Abide in me, as I abide in you. I am the vine, you are the branches. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love," he said. And then he prayed for them…he prayed for his followers down across the centuries…he prayed for us.

"Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one…As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." And then, most haunting of all, "I ask that they may all be one…that they may be completely one, so that the world may know – and believe – that you sent me." (John 17, selected)

The world is ready for a religion like that: a religion that respects each individual, that honors each individual's identity. The world is hungry for a religion that listens instead of condemns, attends to diversity rather than proclaims exclusive truth. A Christianity that remembers and celebrates a Pentecostal connectivity and communication: that humbly and gratefully receives God's gracious gift of oneness and community – and then takes it into the world, all the world.

We read every day about how divided our society is, how polarized politically, socially, economically, culturally: red state, blue state. Every political pundit has commented on the lost art of compassion, of listening and hearing the concerns and priorities of the other side: insisting instead on "our way or the highway."

Perhaps naively, I continue to believe that the church has an incredible opportunity to show a fractured society, a broken

world, that it is possible to preserve unity while respecting diversity, to show the world that it is not only possible but a good thing to love and listen and to try to understand the one with whom I disagree – that is, to practice a Pentecostal Connectivity.

Paul Tillich, one of the most profound Christian thinkers of the twentieth century, could be maddeningly difficult to understand. And, like all great thinkers, he could be profoundly simple. About the elusive idea of the Holy Spirit, he once said, “The Spirit can work in you in a soft but insistent voice.”

Presbyterian friends, this Christian faith of ours, from the very beginning, has been an unusual and remarkably connective religion. Our faith includes the conviction that the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, actively works to bring together separate cultures, races, nations, individuals. This faith of our is in a God whose precious gift is speaking and hearing – communication – and who is always and forever working to bring together, to mend and heal, to reconcile – you and your dear ones, you and your enemies; races, cultures, nations, until the day when all the barriers and boundaries are gone and all are one and the Kingdom has come: a God who, in the meantime comes to each one of us, sometimes loudly, aggressively, as at the Day of Pentecost, but more often softly, quietly, moving us to open our hearts, our minds, our lives, to God and to one another.

Presbyterian broths and sisters, we are called to go into the world to love the world with a passion and strength and commitment with which Jesus loved the world, to go into our world in the very way those men and women did in Pentecost – with the power of God’s Spirit – in our mouths and in our ears, our intellect, emotion and passion, with the love of Christ for one another and for the whole world in our hearts.